



## Arizona Early Childhood Task Force

### **Criteria for Setting Priorities** **Remarks by Karen Ponder** **June 3, 2010**

The states that have been involved in a state-together-with-locals focus for building an early childhood system, along with their partnering state agencies and organizations, have found that prioritizing their work and outcomes is essential.

All of these states have at first offered a very broad template to communities only to discover later that the scope becomes so broad that it is hard to demonstrate any statewide results and the system that they were trying to develop is not sound.

Someone who has worked with organizations for many years said,

“Being dependent on a budget allocation mitigates against setting priorities and concentrating efforts, yet nothing is ever accomplished unless scarce resources are concentrated on a small number of priorities. ... To obtain its budget, it needs the approval, or at least the acquiescence, of practically everybody who remotely could be considered a constituent. ... Being budget-based makes it even more difficult to abandon the wrong things, the old, the obsolete. ... The temptation is great, therefore, to respond to lack of results by redoubling effort.” (Peter Drucker)

Setting the agenda and priorities for FTF will ultimately set the agenda for the regional coalitions.

The process of setting priorities, which may require eliminating other important work, is challenging because of limited resources, competing agendas, and precious time, and sometimes the process of prioritizing brings resistance, particularly from local communities.

Some things to consider in developing priorities include statutes- what does the law say you should do; quantitative and qualitative data; what are your greatest assets; political agendas; public opinion; and other factors. Once priorities are agreed upon and in place, they set the tone for clearer guidelines and measurable outcomes.

My own state struggled with this and spent over a year narrowing the focus of Smart Start and even longer, getting buy-in from stakeholders so we could move forward together. And it is because of priority setting that Smart Start has achieved the goal it set out to achieve- children better prepared to succeed in school. And most who opposed prioritizing would tell you now that it was the right thing to do and literally changed the outcomes for children in their communities.

I want to reiterate that this work is not easy. You must approach it with an understanding that your decisions are high stakes' decisions. They will affect where FTF funding is directed and how the agency is staffed to carry out its work. It also means that some of the activities/strategies that are currently funded with FTF dollars will be reduced as the focus narrows.

On the other hand, I believe it will help you achieve significant results and give you valuable data that demonstrates the benefits of FTF to children, families and the state.

In preparation for this meeting, I looked at various states that have prioritized their scope and funding, and saw some clear commonalities among them. I tried to glean the criteria that were used as well as their lessons learned.

1. The first step in prioritizing is to narrow the scope of services in order to focus on a particular goal, i.e., school readiness and/or access to health services.

Without unlimited funding, no initiative can do it all! Focusing in on the goal is the first order of business. What specifically are you trying to achieve?

2. Anything that is written in statute must be a priority or the law should be changed.

When spending public money, you have to meet the letter of the law.

3. Among the top priorities should be the work that is determined to be most important by local communities.

Children live in local communities and the local needs should be considered first. When we narrowed our funding priorities, we chose strategies that were clearly high priorities for our local coalitions based on their own needs assessments. Recognize that there are some unique needs that are a high priority only in a particular region or area and consider creating a method to allow for some focus and funding to address these needs.

3. Consider the data that is available that comes from research-based strategies.

More information is available than ever before about the programs and strategies that get results. Use the best data available. An area where NC struggled was with family-support programs. Many of those we were funding had no long-term outcomes and yet we were funding tons of them. And we discovered that we were not matching families' needs with the level of intensity that research says is needed. Many of the programs we were funding were home grown and had no data to demonstrate their success and nothing was in place to measure their results. When you prioritize, you have to make hard decisions about what is working and what is not, so use as much good data as possible in making those decisions.

4. Consider the numbers of children/families affected by the strategies that you believe are priorities.

Start with the children with greatest needs, who will benefit most from a high quality early education opportunity. That is not to say that all young children in AZ are not within your scope. However without unlimited resources, you can end up scattering out the money and not getting the results you want and need to demonstrate why FTF is needed and keep the support needed.

5. Remember that you operate within a political environment.

This fact may not change what you are considering but it is always wise to think of your work within your state's political environment.

6. Consider the history: have these same issues you are addressing now been addressed in the past and to what degree? Are there implications from past programs and work that are relevant to your current work?

8. Consider the culture of your counties/communities.

The goal is cultural competence, and I'm not talking about foods, fashions and festivals! I'm talking about assuring that your programs, strategies and services match the families in your local communities that you are trying to serve and serve them in ways that embraces their culture and heritage.

9. Consider the goals and efforts of other partnering organizations and agencies.

All of you as partners are doing important parts of the state's work on behalf of young children and their families. The specific focus of FTF should be considered within that broader context. FTF cannot and should not do everything, and it is important to determine what programmatic and policy issues are the highest priorities for the early childhood system you're creating together.

I want to borrow Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan's terms for talking about early childhood systems and suggest that you all should consider three concepts as you narrow your focus. Dr. Kagan is calling for an early childhood system that has equity, coherence and excellence.

Equity- of educational opportunities for all children regardless of family income or the education level of their parents.

Coherence- bringing all early education programs into a system that has as much quality as quantity and includes the infrastructure needed to support an early childhood system that includes governance, regulations, financing, professional development, standards, assessment, accountability and linkages to the K-12 system.

Excellence- building on the past and focusing on quality in all programs; assuring that all of AZ's programs are culturally competent and the built on a mixed delivery system that creates partnerships among families, programs and communities.